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MANAGEMENT RESPONSE by SDC/SCO

External Review for the Framework Agreement Project "Linking Nature Protection and Sustainable Rural Development" 2012 - 2017

Thematic Fund "Civil Society Participation" of the Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Programme

Background

This is a management response to the final report (July 2017) on the External Review of the project "Linking Nature Protection and Sustainable Rural Development". The final report is issued as a result of a mandate commissioned by SDC and administrated by the Swiss Intermediate Body (SIB) for TF "Civil Society Participation". A team of independent experts conducted the external, end of project review in the period April – June 2017 focusing on i) overall implementation, replication value and sustainability of results of the project; ii) drawing lessons learned and best practices obtained during project implementation that can be considered for future projects in Bulgaria and elsewhere.

The purpose of this management response is to present a consolidated appraisal of SDC (NMS Division) and Swiss Contribution Office in Bulgaria (Embassy of Switzerland in Sofia) on the findings and recommendations shared in the report. Its main addressees are: SDC - to build on lessons learnt for similar projects or for a possible next Swiss Contribution; Bulgarian and Swiss NGOs involved in the project for the continuation of activities in systematically pursuing their missions.

General appreciation

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swiss Contribution Office (SCO) in Sofia acknowledge the receipt and approve the final report prepared by the Review team and would like to express their great satisfaction with the conclusions and recommendations drawn thereto. It is also acknowledged that in the restricted time of the mandate, the review team managed to comprehend the complex character of the project and the dynamic context in which it was implemented. Detailed and comprehensive comparison of project results as defined in the Logframe (Appendix 1 to the report) is also highly appreciated.

Appreciation of the conclusions and recommendations

On conclusions

It is recognised that despite its complex set-up and involvement of multiple Bulgarian and Swiss partners (consortium), the project managed to achieve its overall and specific objective through reinforcing civil society organisations on one hand but also enhancing the sustainable development of areas with high ecological value in Bulgaria. The project contributed as well in

inducing mind-change and paradigm shift that nature conservation and (rural) development can go hand by hand. Furthermore the project effectively contributed to achieving the overall objective of the Civil Society Fund in strengthening the partner NGOs and their network(s). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the level of dependency on international donors is still considerable for Bulgarian civil society actors hence alternatives must be actively sought.

It is also necessary to look at these findings in perspective and to take into consideration the fact that the appraisal on some results is justified through a feedback of those involved and less on evidence based approach. It is SCO understanding that this is mainly due to insufficient monitoring system applied for the project, low statistical value of information collected, initial, well-articulated assumptions or baseline and insufficient time for in depth investigations. For example, the arguments for economic efficiency can be more explicit and convincing.

Identified key factors of success are also important lessons learnt for a possible replication. Those are: 1) sound knowledge base and expertise of the project team; 2) work in parallel on community level and national (legislative, policy) level for credibility, efficiency and sustainability; 3) have a clear strategy for advocating policy changes; and last but not least 4) perseverance and persistence in pursuing own mission(s) while joining forces for common causes .

Black PR campaign against environmental NGOs and the “mobilisation” effect it has on consortium members to (better) demonstrate achievements is yet another prove that active citizenship is an important ingredient of democratic society. It is believed that civil groups, associations and NGO, but also individuals, can give crucial contribution - based on experiences, pilots and innovation - in developing sound environmental policies in Bulgaria, both beneficial for the wise use of natural resources and sustainable development. Despite of the fact that the project is co-financed by Switzerland, SDC/SCO/Swiss Embassy never reacts to local media campaigns nor intervenes in third parties disputes on purpose with the intention of not compromising the independence of the opinions of the NGOs involved. Nevertheless SCO/Swiss Embassy is monitoring the possible impact of such campaigns on its reputation and on the achievements of BSCP’s results.

SDC and SCO agree also that clear positive biodiversity effects are not systematically demonstrated, visible and recognised by project constituencies – like rural communities, pro-biodiversity business but also state or local institutions.

It is acknowledged that commonly developed and applied set of selection criteria and rules for implementing financial approaches (pro biodiversity business, financial instruments, PES schemes) would made project impact much more coherent. Also application of these instruments after the second half of the project limited the opportunity to monitor their outputs.

Despite that project contributes to a number of legislative changes, dynamic political context and limited timespan reduced the opportunity to witness effect of policy adaptations and regulations.

Role and involvement of Swiss partners – involvement of the Swiss organisation and their dual role as experts and management (advisors) is addressed in the report but this dimension is missing from the conclusions and recommendations. It is not clear if this is an omission or intended decision.

On recommendations

As regards exit strategy/termination phase

SDC/SCO fully shares the recommendation to the project partners to invest in communicating project’s results to the broad public. In addition results of the project should be systematically communicated to other constituencies – for example in Switzerland but also in other EU countries.

As regards upscaling of initiatives (Components)

Project partners shall continue accompany and closely monitor the effect of financial approaches (PBB, FI, PES). Deviations from agreed conditions may jeopardise the efforts, resources invested at local level and last but not least the image. Replication or adaptation, where relevant (PES), should be actively pursued through National/EU instruments but also through private (business) involvement.

Direct sales of products from HNV lands - the support to farmers and legislative changes should continue in several directions:

- Demonstrating clear positive effect on biodiversity – for example through introduction of “flag” species or habitats, labels, campaigning or targeted comparative studies etc.;
- Demonstrating positive financial benefits – for example through storytelling and targeted exchange with special focus on young producers, innovation but also underdeveloped regions;
- Securing quality of farmers’ products – through self-organization of producers, set up and promote (voluntary) quality standards or labels and system for peer pressure.

As regards recommendations to NGOs in Bulgaria

SDC/SCO fully share the recommendations of the review and would appreciate to know the intention of the NGOs what regards to possible implementation of the recommendations for upscaling.

As regards recommendations to SDC

The recommendation to use “Theory of change” or “Outcome mapping” as alternative to widely used “logframe” in planning and managing complex initiatives is acknowledged. However these methodologies are little known outside experts’ communities particularly among NGOs and hence shall not be imposed.

The need to improve on the project logic and design (inconsistency of the logframe, lack of baseline values and adequate monitoring system) and the proposal for review by an external expert during planning phase are pertinent.

It is also acknowledged that compatible sociological surveys shall be planned and conducted at the beginning and at the end of the project to measure impact or change in perceptions.

We recognize that management and set-up of similar projects have to be defined based on current experiences and with the perspective to further improve efficiency.

Additional lesson retained for a possible second Swiss Contribution

“Linking Nature” project has the potential to inspire a model of NGO support programme for a possible second Swiss Contribution. It supports initiatives of dedicated NGOs working in partnership for the realization of their complementary missions while developing institutional capacity (advocacy, strategy, innovation, publicity and mobilisation of their constituency etc.), possibly with the inputs of Swiss NGOs expertise. This model represents a sound alternative of the support for (limited) service delivery through a block grant approach, and focus on the strengthening of the civil society actors to become a solid partner of dialogue and action for the development of the country.